

THE BIG STRANGER ON DORCHESTER HEIGHTS¹

By ALBERT DU VERNEY PENTZ

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PERHAPS it was Saturday, anyway, it was one of the first days of March, 1860. Paul DuVerney and Bowdoin Capen had been playing marbles on a bare spot of clay near the junction of Dorchester street and Broadway, South Boston. It was afternoon, and not late. At that period school hours were different; Wednesday had a half-holiday and Saturday but a half-holiday. Hence this was either Wednesday, Saturday, or truancy. Paul was capable of a companionable lapse of that character; Bowdy was a persuasive boy. When the sun comes beaming north it entices people out into its smiling warmth; often induces older persons than those just entering their teens to bathe in its glorious flood.

When the boys parted Bowdy took the marbles home with him; Paul's pockets were as light as his spirits, as he went up Linden street toward where his father was at work on a row of houses then building on the Old Harbor side of the hill.

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About half-way up this street Paul heard someone coming from behind with long, strong strides. Turning, the boy saw a gigantic man swinging up the narrow walk; soon the two came close together. "Say, Bub, is this the right road to Dorchester Heights?"

"Yes, sir."

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"Pretty steep walking, isn't it? Ain't many hills where I live."

Paul volunteered to guide the stranger, and the foot of the preserve was quickly reached.

Curiosity prompted the boy to climb the incline in company with the visitor. At the top they halted in the middle near the little reservoir which then occupied the present site of a schoolhouse.

"Of course you know the history of this place?" asked the stranger.

"Everybody knows that."

They faced the harbor; the State House dome shone far away on the left.

"The fleet lay about there," said the boy, glad to show his knowledge.

"Then Washington planted his guns where we stand."

"So everybody says, sir."

"And George Washington probably stood just where I now stand. Here he made history that counts for something."

The great big man stooped over and scrabbled up a handful of pebbles which he put into his trousers pocket. He was dressed in black cloth; he wore a tall hat, as many men did at that time.

"Probably this gravel was brought here from somewhere else. Well! So was I; but both of us are better for having been here."

This was not said to Paul but addressed to the surroundings.

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Soon the stranger saw all that interested him and said, "Bub, I am glad to have been here. I may not have another opportunity, and am glad to have come."

Paul accompanied the man down to Broadway and Dorchester street. He had never seen so big a man before, nor so gaunt a face, nor such sad eyes that could light up so finely. This face fixed itself in his memory.

After a long wait a horse-car came along and the big man thanked Paul for his kindness, wrapped the boy's hand and wrist within his gigantic hand and went cityward.

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The summer came with intense interest. The crisis with slavery had come. Every one was excited. Conventions had nominated candidates and political clubs were formed. Wide-Awakes paraded every night with flaming lamps and oil-cloth capes. Paul was now fourteen and quite tall, so he enrolled.

He was one of the most enthusiastic members of the club, for there at the end of Waitts Hall on the high wall was a picture of the big stranger who had visited Washington Heights in his company. Beneath was

“ABRAHAM LINCOLN.”